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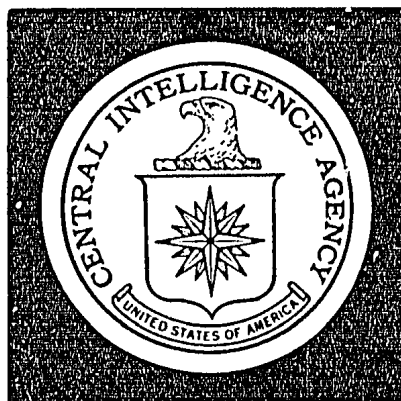
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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

# Intelligence Memorandum

*Sihanouk and the Next Round in the Struggle for Cambodia*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
26 March 1970

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Sihanouk and the Next Round  
In the Struggle for Cambodia

Summary

Prince Sihanouk and the North Vietnamese, with the approval of the Chinese Communists, have moved rapidly to challenge the Lon Nol - Sirik Matak government in Cambodia. The new leaders in Phnom Penh are swiftly consolidating their rule with the firm support of major elements in the country. Sihanouk knows that if he is ever to manage a return to power, support from the Communists is vital, however distasteful. The Communists do not want to see any diminution of their use of Cambodia for sanctuary, infiltration, and resupply in their campaign in South Vietnam.

The Communists almost certainly hope to make a deal with the new Cambodian Government that will restore their previous position. They probably hope that their efforts in support of Sihanouk's direct call for the overthrow of the new leadership in Phnom Penh will intimidate Lon Nol into an accommodation. There is no guarantee, however, that the Cambodian leaders will back off under pressure. If they do not, the North Vietnamese have two options open to them: they can defend their base areas against attack and simply hang on waiting for something to break, or they can take the offensive, presumably with the purpose of creating conditions that would lead to the early restoration of Sihanouk's rule. Lon Nol would probably then turn to the US and the South Vietnamese for military support, but events could move very swiftly if the Communists decide to move forcefully.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates.

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New Leadership's Present Status

1. With the backing of the army, the new leaders in Phnom Penh have moved with skill and sureness to consolidate their position. Arrests of pro-Sihanouk stalwarts, particularly those who controlled the police and paramilitary force, have almost certainly ruled out the possibility of an early counter-coup. The highly respected Buddhist clergy have been brought into the fold; the leading bonzes have made the appropriate remarks on the national radio, and they have pledged to carry word of the new arrangements to the villages. The bureaucracy is taking orders from the new leadership, and the overwhelming majority of the country's diplomats are supporting Lon Nol and Sirik Matak. There may be some grumbling in the countryside, particularly in the towns and larger villages, where Sihanouk spent so much of his time trying to build rapport with the "people," but if there is serious dissension, it is unorganized and inchoate. Lon Nol is planning to visit some of these areas, evidently to instill among the populace and low-level military and civilian functionaries a sense of continuity and equilibrium. The youth appear to be quiescent, at least for the time being.

2. The new leadership is united and in firm control of the situation. If there were no outside pressure, no possibility that the Communists might bring Sihanouk back into the country or might take steps to test the mettle of Lon Nol and Matak, there would be little reason to question the judgment that Sihanouk is now out of the picture. Evidence is accumulating, however, that the transition in Phnom Penh will not be allowed to proceed so smoothly. Lon Nol and Matak made the Vietnamese Communist problem the issue on which they brought down Sihanouk. They may soon regret that they did not pick something else.

The 23 March Proclamation

3. On the evening of 23 March, four days after his arrival in Peking, Sihanouk broadcast a message to the Cambodian people that included a five-point proclamation. In his capacity as "legal chief

of state," he dissolved the Lon Nol government, the national assembly, and the Council of the Kingdom--the upper house of the legislature. He proclaimed the formation of a "government of national union" and a "consultative assembly" that would include "qualified representatives" of the Buddhist clergy, the army, police, intellectuals, peasants, and others. He announced the formation of a "national liberation army" to overthrow the Lon Nol "pro-imperialist reactionaries" and to struggle against the "American imperialists." And finally, he established a "National United Front of Kampuchea" to provide the umbrella for the other newly created organizations.

4. Sihanouk's broadcast included a number of practical points not in the actual proclamation. He called on the Cambodian people to take to the jungle to carry out the struggle. He promised arms and ammunition to his followers and claimed that a "military school" would be established in a remote area to provide training. He stated that "formal support" would be forthcoming from socialist countries, and implied that the struggle would be undertaken in cooperation with Communist forces. This latter point was also implied in the five-point proclamation's reference to the "liberation army" waging its struggle in common with "anti-imperialist forces" of "brother countries." The 23 March proclamation reads as if it were lifted out of one of the Communists' worn revolutionary handbooks. Replete with Communist banalities, the rhetoric of the proclamation and the broadcast to the nation is Sihanouk at his forensic worst.

#### Sihanouk's Rationale

5. The statements emanating from Peking are clear evidence that the Prince is not about ready to be sidelined. The abuse heaped on former associates, the inability to talk dispassionately with supporters about what had to be done during the early days of the crisis, the dramatic tearing to pieces of the government's messages, are all typical displays of Sihanouk's histrionics. They are also evidence of the profound personal crisis gripping him. With a considerable basis in fact, Sihanouk regards himself as the father of his country,

the man who successfully guided Cambodia to independence with a minimum of bloodshed and turmoil, who has managed through guile and hard work to keep Cambodia intact and at peace through a prolonged period of regional political instability and war. The messages from Peking are alive with Sihanouk's sense of injustice, anger over the wrong he feels has been done him, and the desire for revenge and self-justification.

6. But in assessing Sihanouk's statements from Peking, one must not forget another side of his character. His egotism has always been tempered by a sincere desire to do what is right for Cambodia. For years, Sihanouk has rehearsed the events of the past two weeks in his mind's eye. Working out the various possibilities in his rambling speeches to the Cambodian peasantry, the Prince has stated that he would bow before his rightist and leftist critics rather than lead Cambodia into civil war. He has always argued that what has happened in Laos must not be allowed to happen in Cambodia, and that even a Communist Cambodia would be better than no Cambodia at all. And since the Communists will, he thinks, ultimately prevail in Southeast Asia, the only choice open to any true nationalist is to accept the communization of Cambodia, better in any event than dismemberment of the country by Vietnam and Thailand.

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7. As melodramatic as these notions may appear, they are firmly rooted in Cambodian experience and prejudice, as the wave of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in the country attests. Sihanouk, of course, had no way of knowing when such a hard choice would face the country; indeed, US progress in South Vietnam gave him fresh hope for the immediate future. Nor did Sihanouk foresee that he might some day have to choose between the tribulations of civil war and sufferance of a rightist regime that he is convinced will lead to Cambodia's demise as a nation-state. In a state of psychological disequilibrium, Sihanouk may believe that this is the hard choice that now faces him. It is in this context that Sihanouk's seemingly contradictory remarks in the 21 March "political declaration" regarding renouncing the "absurd title" of chief of state, while

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leading the "sacred struggle...to erase this coup," acquires some meaning. That statement and the one issued on the 23rd bear the imprint of the Prince's Chinese and North Vietnamese advisers, but they also suggest Sihanouk is acting out the political fears and fantasies of a lifetime.

8. No one can tell how long Sihanouk will stay on the course that he is setting for himself in Peking, or to what lengths he will go to achieve his objectives. It is extremely doubtful that he himself knows. We may yet see Sihanouk act the patriot who will try to save Cambodia by taking himself out of the picture, but this is not the signal he is presently sending from Peking.

#### The Communist Influence

9. There can be no question that the proclamation represents the current strategy of the North Vietnamese and to a lesser degree of the Chinese Communists. The proclamation stands in sharp contrast to Sihanouk's statements in Peking on 19 and 20 March. The latter are more typically Sihanouk in their discursiveness, their attempts at legalistic justification. They also included an almost certainly sincere, if not germane, proposal that an International Control Commission (ICC) force be sent into Cambodia to oversee a "national referendum." Sihanouk had talked about such a referendum in France before his ouster was consummated. This proposal, which from the Communists' point of view bears an embarrassing resemblance to the Lon Nol government's own 23 March call for reconstituting the ICC, is not mentioned in the 23 March proclamation or in any of Sihanouk's other pronouncements.

10. Sihanouk's political plans apparently underwent some significant changes in the hectic days between 19 and 23 March. These probably represented some refinement in his own thinking, particularly in view of the continuing hard line that was being propounded by the new leadership in Phnom Penh. There is also good reason to believe that once the Communists began to get a handle on the fast-breaking situation and decided on a certain course of action--at least for the very short term--they began



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to weigh in with Sihanouk. The gravity with which the Communists viewed the situation is clear in the speed with which Prime Minister Pham Van Dong went to Peking. Pham arrived in the Chinese capital on the 21st. That evening [redacted]

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[redacted] he was closeted with Sihanouk and Chou En-lai. Pham saw Sihanouk at least two more times.

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11. We have no information on what was said during these meetings. It seems a good bet, however, that the general outline of what Sihanouk later said on 23 March was hammered out at that first meeting. We may never know how these talks progressed, but on the basis of past performance, it seems likely that Sihanouk elicited as many concessions as he could get from Pham Van Dong. The Communists, however, held most of the cards, as both they and Sihanouk must have been quick to recognize. Without Vietnamese and Chinese support, the Prince had virtually no chance of even returning to Cambodia in the near future, much less as a vengeful leader ready to dispatch the usurpers. Even if Sihanouk were willing to return to Phnom Penh in less exalted circumstances--the possibility of finding a face-saving formula may have occurred to him--every official dispatch and wire-service account out of Phnom Penh made it increasingly unlikely that Lon Nol and Sirik Matak would offer any concessions unless they were compelled to do so. And only the Vietnamese were in a position to apply the necessary pressure.

12. The Communists exacted a heavy price. Sihanouk had to lend his name, his waning prestige, perhaps the last vestige of his neutralist and nationalist credentials, to documents that clearly served Communist interests. If he were to come back to Cambodia, it would be as the Communists' creature. Sihanouk is no Souphanouvong and this must have been a bitter pill to swallow. For over two years, the Prince had been denouncing the leaders in Hanoi, their contempt for Cambodia's integrity, and their duplicity. His suspicions and dislike go back much farther. The presence of Chou En-lai, who has been dealing adroitly with Sihanouk for over 15 years and

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who has in the past traded effectively on the Prince's friendship, may have made things a bit easier. Si-hanouk presumably could also take comfort from the belief that he was acting in Cambodia's best interests, that once he was back in power he would again be his own man, willing and able to cope with the Communists as only he could.

### The North Vietnamese Position

13. The North Vietnamese must have viewed the crisis as one fraught with enormous risks--but just possibly also as one presenting a real opportunity to someone willing to grasp it. The risks were obvious: Cambodian rice, medicine, and other nonmilitary supplies are essential to the Communists, and the flow of arms through Sihanoukville is almost as important. Lon Nol and Sirik Matak rode to power, moreover, on a wave of anti-Vietnamese sentiment, and there might be a real possibility that they meant what they were saying. With a perception of the power realities in the region rather different from Sihanouk's, they might even go so far as to make certain de facto arrangements with the US and South Vietnam. This could prove disastrous to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units strung out along the 400-mile border between South Vietnam and Cambodia.

14. The Communists could have tried to ameliorate this situation by temporizing--by reining in their propagandists and trying to work out a new modus vivendi with the Cambodians. They have not done so; in fact, their pronouncements have become steadily more militant, notwithstanding a good many conciliatory noises from the new Cambodian regime. Hanoi came out foursquare behind Sihanouk and the call for "national liberation", in a government communiqué on 25 March. The statement leaves little doubt that the Vietnamese Communists think intimidation, by bluster and if necessary by force, is the best way to get what they want out of the new government in Phnom Penh.

the Communists still hope that their intimidation tactics will buy them a new deal with the present Cambodian Government, thus making more extreme measures unnecessary.

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15. There could be other reasons for Hanoi's hard line: the Communists could simply believe Lon Nol and Matak are US stooges and that there is no point in trying to deal with them; they could be in such dire need of rice and other supplies that they feel unable to take the time to negotiate a modus vivendi; or they could see the crisis, with all its risks, as an opportunity to force major concessions from Phnom Penh. The fact that they have ignored more than one conciliatory pronouncement from the Cambodians suggests that they may have seized on this last possibility. Their position strongly implies, in fact, that they intend to make heavy demands and that they think they have a good chance of getting what they want. More specifically, they will be looking for more secure and advantageous arrangements for obtaining rice, supplies, and arms; a virtual carte blanche for Communist activities along the Vietnam border; and probably also the return to Phnom Penh of Sihanouk, suitably chastened and beholden to them. (The Communists might also be willing to live with a Cambodian Government without Sihanouk if they thought it was thoroughly intimidated. This, however, would entail a good many more risks.)

16. Some of the assumptions that would have to underlie a Communist decision to employ force can be guessed at. Hanoi would have to have concluded, for instance, that any likely US or South Vietnamese intervention, either directly in Phnom Penh or along the Vietnamese border, could be coped with. The Communists would also have to conclude that even a fairly wide-ranging military action against the Cambodians would not divert too many of their resources from the war in Vietnam. They would also have to be willing to face the consequences of depriving themselves of the well-worn fiction that there are no North Vietnamese troops on the scene--a fiction they have gone to some pains to preserve not far away in Laos. The fact that, taking all these considerations into account, they have tightened the screws as hard and as fast on the Cambodians as they have already, is an indication of the magnitude of the stakes they think they are playing for--win or lose.

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17. There is no guarantee, as the Communists must realize, that the new Cambodian leaders will take the easy way out. Lon Nol and especially Matak have been remarkably courageous in moving against Sihanouk, and there is a fair chance that they will not get cold feet now. They may even be somewhat intoxicated by the achievements of the past few months; hubris is not unknown in Phnom Penh. If they prove obdurate, the Communists can do one of two things: they can defend their base areas against Cambodian attack, threaten to take offensive action if the Cambodians continue to press, and simply hang in until something favorable breaks--presumably something that involves Sihanouk. The situation on the border now is precisely in keeping with such a pattern. On the other hand, the Communists could take the offensive, presumably with the purpose of creating conditions that would lead to the early restoration of Sihanouk.

18. Vietnamese Communist attacks on Cambodian provincial towns--under the banner, of course, of Sihanouk's "liberation army"--particularly those near the capital and within easy striking distance of strong Communist forces, would precipitate a major crisis in Phnom Penh. Although Matak and Lon Nol may have nerve, they are surrounded by sycophants who would have little trouble pledging renewed fealty to Sihanouk. Under circumstances in which it appeared that the Communists were threatening to overrun the country, Sihanouk would probably begin to look good to many of those elements whose support for the present leadership is probably razor thin. Counted among these would almost certainly be younger elements in the army, who [redacted] are not particularly pleased that Lon Nol is running things. Lon Nol and Matak would probably turn to the US and the South Vietnamese for military support, but events could move very swiftly if the Communists decide to move forcefully.

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